

# Children's Health

**“I was born part of this earth.”  
—Daniel Western**

Photo: Jim Keleher



## SUNWISE/Boston

Although one in five Americans develops skin cancer, it is our children who are most at risk. Eighty percent of lifetime sun exposure occurs before the age of 18, and one or two severe childhood sunburns can double the risk for melanoma later in life. Because of the thinning of the natural ozone layer due to CFC use, UV exposure at ground level is increasing, amplifying the potential for health problems from sun exposure. The good news is that simple steps, followed early and consistently, can help individuals avoid UV-related health problems.

Boston is one of three cities to pilot a new EPA environmental and public health education program for elementary school age children. The program's goals are to familiarize children with the use of the UV Index daily in the classroom (using either the Internet or the local paper), to educate them about the sun's damaging rays with classroom materials and teach simple steps to avoid overexposure to the sun, and to encourage school administrators to adopt sun safety policies and practices such as creating shade cover in outdoor areas.

**P**resident Clinton called healthy children and strong families fundamental to the future of our nation, emphasizing that protection of the environment is critical to our children's health. Pound for pound, children eat more food, breathe more air, and drink more fluids than adults, and their developing systems make them even more vulnerable to environmental hazards. While we are seeing progress on many environmental problems, current statistics about increasing rates of asthma among young children and relatively constant rates of lead poisoning in many urban areas in New England have caused serious concern. We must increase our vigilance, and protect children from chemical residues on their food, ensure that the air they breathe — both within their homes and outside — is as safe as possible, and that the tap water in their homes and schools runs pure and clean.

## Lead Poisoning: A New England Challenge

One of the most severe threats to children's health in New England is lead poisoning, which can cause lifelong developmental and intelligence problems. Because of the large number of older houses that may contain lead-based paint or lead solder for pipes, New England faces a particularly serious problem. EPA-New England has made the prevention of childhood lead poisoning a major priority—activities described elsewhere in this report include the Roxbury/Dorchester EMPACT lead abatement project, the Little Moccasins project, and the UEI Providence lead-testing initiative, as well as the Manchester Child Health Champion project described below. An enforcement settlement with the Rhode Island Department of Transportation will fund a \$438,500 project to remove lead from day care facilities in Rhode Island. It is expected that approximately 120 day care facilities serving approximately 8,000 children will participate in the project. EPA continues to take emergency removal actions to de-lead specific sites. EPA has also produced “English as a Second Language” teaching materials with lead as a subject. These materials are used to teach English to non-native speakers while also giving them information about lead poisoning dangers.

## Home Away from Home: Environmental Care for Schools

Making sure that our schools are safe and healthy places for children is the focus of EPA-New England's safe schools initiative. A longer school day, coupled with the need for extended hours of daycare for families with working parents, has meant that many of our children are spending up to eleven hours every day in school during the academic year, and more children are enrolled in American schools than ever before. One of every five New Englanders works in a school building as a student, teacher, or member of the school staff. Potential hazards include unhealthy air, the presence of asbestos, and hazardous chemicals from chemistry labs, art supplies, cleaning equipment, and auto repair classes.

## A Special Tool Kit

EPA-New England's Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Tools for Schools kit is one effective way to identify potential causes of the poor indoor air quality that affects children's health and learning. The kit includes checklists for different members of the school community, suggested action plans for resolving problems, and a communications guide for coordinating the efforts of teachers, boards, parents, and the rest of the community. The program's partners—including the New England chapters of the American Lung Association, the state-based Coalitions of Occupational Safety and Health, the Environmental Health Policy Program at the Tufts University School of Medicine, and the Harvard School of Public Health—have sponsored dozens of workshops and conferences introducing the IAQ Tools for Schools approach to various segments of the education community. "Taking Action," EPA's new nationwide training video on implementing the IAQ Tools for Schools Kit was filmed by the crew of the popular series "This Old House," using the Little Harbour School team in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Throughout the region, more than sixty schools and school systems are implementing the IAQ Tools for Schools program. Participants include the Massachusetts Health Department, local health departments, and the Maine Governor's School Facilities Commission. Polaroid Corporation has initiated an "Adopt-a-School" training program among its corporate environmental managers to support the use of the IAQ Tools for Schools kit.

## Child Health Champions

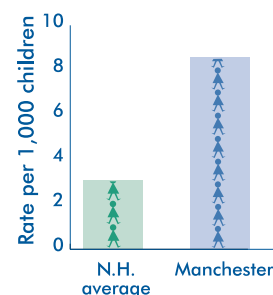
Manchester, New Hampshire is one of eleven Child Health Champion national pilot communities engaged in an aggressive local campaign to reduce environmental health risks facing its children. With the help of \$135,000 in EPA funding from our Office of Children's Health Protection, a group of organizations representing a broad spectrum of the Manchester community—from the health department to a local theater group—was formed to help the city's children have a strong and healthy future. In addition, an innovative EPA agreement with the city (over sewer rebuilding required by the Clean Water Act) will bring approximately \$500,000 for children's health programs to Manchester over the next five years.

The city's Child Health Champion project offers young families information about how to create a healthy home, right from the start. The project offers free smoking cessation classes, so that the children in close contact with adults who smoke will not be at risk from the effects of exposure to secondhand smoke. The project also provides in-home services to reduce asthma allergens and lead dust. The local chapter of the Audubon Society is offering free after school eco-health programs to children who need a safe place to go while their homes are being cleaned. The community's theater group is producing a show that helps young families understand what they can do to reduce children's environmental health risks. Working together, Manchester's Child Health Champions have become a national model that demonstrates how a community can come together to make a difference for their children.

### SUNWISE tips:

- Read the UV Index daily
- Wear sunglasses that block UV radiation
- Always use sunscreen when outside on a sunny day
- Wear a hat with a brim
- Wear light clothing to protect your skin from strong sun rays

**Figure 9**  
Elevated Blood Lead Levels in Children\*



\*children less than 6 years of age with blood lead levels greater than 15 ug/ml gl for 1994-1995

sources: Manchester Health Dept., NH Dept. of Public Health Services